

Case Study

# New Access Deals for Textbooks

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# New Access Deals for Textbooks

**Working with publishers can benefit students, but give faculty a say**

**N**ext year, students at Warren County Community College are going to benefit from a deal that is almost “too good to be true,” says the college’s president, Will Austin. Starting in the spring, the New Jersey institution’s 1,600 students will have, for a fee, digital access to all the textbooks and corresponding material for all their courses on the first day of class. The college has contracted directly with a major publisher, and both faculty and students must use its publications to participate.

It’s a move that Austin says will benefit students.

“Some students weren’t buying any textbooks and were trying to get by, and it hampered our graduation rates,” Austin says. “Others were buying books and didn’t have money to buy food.”

Warren County Community College is part of a growing trend on college campuses toward a model of textbook sales called inclusive access. As textbooks have become increasingly expensive and students look for ways to avoid purchasing new ones — from renting to sharing to using free resources to simply doing without — publishers are desperate to find new methods of delivering their products.



Warren County Community College

**A student shops for books at Warren County Community College, which made a deal with a publisher to provide course materials to students at a reduced price.**

Inclusive access is a term that covers a variety of models but generally it allows institutions or faculty — either on a course, department or collegewide basis — to make deals with publishers that automatically provides students with digital course material at a reduced price billed through tuition or students' university accounts.

Students generally like it because it offers lower prices, and faculty often like it because it means students have access to textbooks and other material on the first day of classes. Typically, textbooks are only part of what students are buying, with subscriptions often including interactive course material, homework, quizzes, and exams.

Although it is difficult to track inclusive-access programs, Marisa Bluestone, a spokeswoman for the Association of American Publishers, says that more than 400 colleges and universities nationwide have such programs, and the interest is growing.

One major reason inclusive access took off when it did can be traced to a U.S. Department of Education decision to alter its rules in 2015 to allow higher-education institutions to include the cost of course materials in tuition and fees if an institution has an arrangement that offers a discounted rate and allows students to opt out.

While many applaud any effort to lower the cost of textbooks and related resources, the models are not

without their critics and adopting it at a college or university can be tricky.

In 2016, the University of Arizona decided to try a pilot program and “we searched for some professors that we worked with closely who would be willing to be part of the pilot,” says Cindy Hawk, assistant director of the book division at the university’s book stores. “We had three different professors that included seven different courses and 13 different sections, along with three different publishers.”

“It was quite a complicated process to link everything together,” she adds. “Every publisher works differently and sometimes there are two or three different ways content can be delivered.”

Since students have the option of opting in or out of the system up until the add/drop date for classes, the university partnered with two vendors to manage the process.

“Sometimes students choose to opt out, and then find there are advantages to opting in, so they change their mind,” Hawk says. The university does not guarantee publishers that a certain number of students will use inclusive access.

A survey done by the bookstore shows that professors and students mostly liked inclusive access although the opt-out rate ranges from 1 percent to 9 percent depend-



University of Arizona

At the U. of Arizona, 159 courses are using inclusive access to help students receive textbooks.

ing on the term, she says. It's not clear why some semesters have more opt-out rates than others. The bookstore plans to do a survey this year to dig deeper.

According to a 2017-18 [survey](#) by the National Association of College Stores, of the 1,604 students who responded, almost half were satisfied with inclusive access and just under a quarter were not. Of the 442 who said they opted out, the top reasons included: wanting a print version, already having a copy of the materials, or finding it cheaper somewhere else.

So far, in the fall at the University of Arizona, 159 courses are using inclusive access and saving about 50 percent compared with new book prices, Hawk says. With an enrolled student body of more than 40,000, that means not even one-third of the students are using the service, Hawk says. "It's just the tip of the iceberg."

Hawk says the university is letting the program grow organically until the technology is completely in place, then plans to do more promotion, focusing on the courses that use the most expensive books. The university will also run a marketing campaign across campus to encourage faculty to consider using inclusive access.

Hawk says there are bugs to work out, but the benefits are huge, especially the lower prices and the access to content the first day of class, which, she says, is particularly important to students who are waiting for financial

aid to arrive.

The bookstore offers students a [web page](#) on frequently asked questions about inclusive access and an automated "welcome email" on the first day of class.

"As the opt-out day gets closer, students receive daily reminders to opt out if they don't wish to purchase," Hawk says.

Cheryl Cuillier, an associate librarian at Arizona who handles open educational material, is a little worried about where inclusive access will lead.

**"Some students weren't buying any textbooks and were trying to get by, and it hampered our graduation rates."**

"I think it's a very good deal for publishers and they've been very creative with new textbook models," she says.

"I think it depends on whether it's good for students. The question is whether the prices are as low as the publishers say, and whether they'll stay low. There's some



University of Arizona

A survey of undergraduates at the U. of Arizona found that many support the inclusive-access model.

wariness among librarians about the publisher model of pricing and access.”

She also worries that having the content be solely digital will be a burden on some students. “We know students may not have their own laptops and there are students who don’t have reliable Wi-Fi off campus. And to have the content on property vendor platforms makes it complicated for students to access the content after the course ends.”

Cuillier says she would like to see more faculty understand and use [open educational resources](#), which are free.

William Neumann, a professor of practice in management information systems at the university, participated in the pilot program. With 2,500 students in his freshman courses on business and technology, he can offer publishers access to more students than some small colleges.

“When this came around, I was immediately interested,” he says. Neumann negotiated his own deal with a publisher.

“One thing I really pressed for is that I didn’t want

there to be mandatory adoption, which we had done in other pilots,” Neumann says. “Unless there’s some material the student must buy from that one source, they should have a choice. If they don’t like electronic books, they should be able to get a paperback that serves them during the semester.”

He agreed to use the material for a two-year minimum and “the discount we get from the publisher is significant.” He also set it up so all content — quizzes, exams, and other material — is hosted on the university’s own learning-management system, not on the publisher’s site.

“Like Microsoft, publishers want you to have to buy part and parcel, and may not be willing to do a la carte,” he says. “But if a student is required to use a publisher’s online system to complete an assignment, it’s virtually impossible to opt out, because they would have to be able to buy in to access it.”

Open education resources are a good option more faculty should check out, Neumann says, but thinks “the sweet spot is for more stable content that doesn’t really change from year to year. Technology changes con-

stantly. One of the challenges of open access is not just to provide a book that works today, but three, four, five years down the line.”

**“I tried to do it the most cost-effective way for me. A lot of my classmates didn’t get books — they took pictures of the pages they need with their phones.”**

The real issue, all agree, is not so much about the current models but how inclusive access will evolve.

Once an institution has invested a great deal in infrastructure, it’s harder to make changes. “The question will be how well the discounts are negotiated and how long they will last and often faculty don’t look at that piece,” Neumann says.

Austin, the president of Warren, says he and others in the faculty and administration spent numerous weekends going through the publisher’s offerings in various subjects to make sure what they offered would be comparable to what is now being taught.

He acknowledged that he expects to run up against some skepticism when the program is implemented but says the Board of Trustees unanimously approved it and most of the faculty support the deal. The college, with a liaison from the publisher, has already begun training instructors and explaining the process to students. Students will pay \$140 a year for access, says Phil Linfante,

chair of Warren’s board.

One faculty member who is supportive but concerned about the impact on academic freedom is BJ Ward, a professor of English and creative writing at the college.

“I’m of two minds about it,” he says. “The overwhelming factor is the immediate benefit it will be for the students. Some students work full-time for minimum wage, and it angers me how they have to work a whole week, or perhaps two weeks, to afford a textbook for one semester.”

His biggest concern, he says, is academic freedom. “The faculty never voted on this — were just told we were going to do this.” He says he was unable to attend a meeting the publisher held for faculty and others in June, but he did submit questions.

“They’re forcing us into this strange intellectual Iron Chef scenario — make a meal out of these books,” he says. “As much as part of me wants to make a stand on principle, we are models of active learning and this is a very real example of us needing to operate in a new textbook world to benefit that single mother or father working full-time to afford rent and trying to get an education.”

Jimmy Crouse was one of those students. He graduated from Warren County last year and is now attending a four-year university.

“Books were costing me about \$1,000 per year,” Crouse says. “I tried to do it the most cost-effective way for me. A lot of my classmates didn’t get books — they took pictures of the pages they need with their phones.”

Crouse says he would have loved to have such a program in place when he was at Warren and “my hope is every college will go this way.”

At the University of Arizona, Neumann, the professor, figures either way inclusive access shakes out, it’s a plus for him and his students.

“If this works, that’s great,” he says. “If not, we can take it apart as a case study.” ■

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